

HISTORY OF THE DIVISION OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE
AT THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

Ohio State University

1969

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The Ohio State University, like many of our large state schools, is a small world in itself. With an entering class each year of approximately 7000 freshmen, it receives a tremendous variety of students. Certainly it would be almost impossible to establish anything approaching a valid and recognizable Ohio State type. The incoming students have in common only a diploma from an accredited high school and a desire to better themselves in a manner, not always very clear, by attendance at the university. Every year they come in ever increasing numbers, rich and poor, lazy and industrious, almost illiterate and highly intelligent.

Perhaps the most notable shortcoming of our students is a lack of experience in good reading, -not just in the great classics but in good reading in general. This lack is not confined to the poor students; it exists in many of really superior ability. Even after several successful years in the university a student may have avoided, not necessarily intentionally, any knowledge of most of the outstanding works of world literature. It is even possible that he might receive his B.A. and still be relatively ignorant of most of them. If this statement is true of the student in the College of Arts and Sciences, then it is also obviously applicable to those enrolled in the other colleges of the university.

In 1951, a group of distinguished professors determined to do something about it. Kenneth M. Abbott, professor of

Classical Languages, took the initiative and under his leadership a series of courses was set up. Next a committee of interested teachers from various departments to teach and administer the new series was formed. They adopted the committee plan as they wished to be independent of any one department and responsible to the Dean only.

On this committee were volunteer members from the departments of Classical Languages, Romance Languages, German and English. Harry Rogers was chairman of this group. For the sake of convenience they called the series Comparative Literature, although in reality it was a course in the Masterpieces of Western Literature.

They arranged the sequence in three courses of one quarter each, and classes were to meet three times a week. The choice of books was a more or less conventional one, starting with the Old Testament and ending with Faust.

It was the hope and plan to have only instructors of long and successful experience as teachers. The course was to be tailored to the teacher. Participation in the new venture was entirely voluntary, and from the start many of the best professors in the Humanities have not only been willing to enter the program but have devoted themselves to it year after year. These teachers were, of course, not experts in all the fields and usually widely read in others. They decided that the courses were to be reading and discussion groups and were to be sharply limited in size.

In the fall of 1951, three sections were started. The

total enrollment was 39 rather superior students, all from the College of Arts and Sciences. This was an exciting, rewarding, but difficult year. All of the teachers were forced to the limit to establish procedure and to become familiar with material outside their own fields. During the succeeding years the numbers of students have steadily increased, until the enrollment is now about 1500 each quarter, with many turned away. There is no prerequisite and it is not necessary to complete the sequence, although about 80% do so.

In the fall of 1959, a new Humanities requirement went into effect at the university. This meant that students from all of the colleges were required to take a minimum of 15 quarter hours in the Humanities. Of these hours, eight had to be in literature or advanced language study. Since that ruling went into effect, all of the undergraduate colleges have been represented in the Comparative Literature series. Since that time our enrollment has greatly increased, as Comparative Literature presents a convenient sequence of nine hours. It is surprising how pleasant the idea of Comparative Literature is to many students who have only the vaguest idea of what it involves.

Since 1959, the influx of undergraduates into the course has been astounding. The increase has been approximately 100%. Professor Rogers saw the grave danger in such an increased enrollment and spent the last years of his chairmanship supplying the division with experienced teachers and guarding against enlarged class enrollments. The purpose, of course, has always been to teach reading with understanding, and thus far, this

goal has been religiously guarded. In a large university the Division of Comparative Literature is able to pride itself on the fact that its students are still able to enter a classroom where they can discuss and debate rather than watch T.V. lectures with 400 students.

After 40 years of faithful service to the University Professor Rogers retired from Ohio State, and the Dean appointed Wayne Lawson as Acting Chairman for the Division of Comparative Literature. The new chairman is now working to maintain the basic principle upon which the course was founded, and to increase the quality of good teaching standards which are necessary to a varied program of this type. 90% of the faculty members in the Division have their M.A.'s and are working toward their Ph.D.'s in their own specialized areas. In 1969 - 1970, our Division will include teachers with degrees from Philosophy, English, Education, Speech, Theatre, French, Spanish, and other related fields. This variety of backgrounds creates an intensity and stimulating atmosphere in which to work, and one from which our students may gain a great deal of literary knowledge.

In 1968, the Dean of the new College of Humanities asked for a review of the Division's offering. With the great increase of students and the changing academic environments, it was thought best to review and modernize our courses to better serve the undergraduate students. A Curriculum Committee was formed with members from Classics, Romance Languages, Slavic Languages, Theatre and English, and they were charged with the responsibility of developing and organizing a new course sequence. After many

weeks of research, heated meetings, and reviews by the department members, a new set of courses were prepared for the Fall, 1969.

Since 1951, the idea of the place of the Humanities in the University has changed. The Division has worked toward a series of courses that will support and preserve the idea of the Humanities in our ever-changing society, and has attempted to keep abreast of the increasing number of interested students. The distinctive role of these courses in the University curriculum is two fold: a) instruction in small sections that allows the student greater opportunity to develop his understanding of literature through writing and discussions; b) an opportunity to approach Western Literature in a manner that crosses the traditional divisions of academic literature and language departments in the University.

The former courses were chronological surveys of great books, with a major emphasis on the ancient, and included nothing beyond the early nineteenth century. The new curriculum is organized around major themes and concepts as they are treated by a variety of literatures. The scope of the course has been broadened to include literature from the modern period and from countries that have previously been neglected. Each quarter of the year's work will include works from antiquity to the contemporary world, translated from a variety of languages, and representative of most Western countries.

Comparative Literature, through the efforts of such men as Professor Rogers, Professor Haber, Professor Abbott, Professor

Burkhardt, Professor Seidlin, Professor Titchener and Professors Meiden, Frosch, and Mitchell has grown from three classes of 39 students to a quarterly offering of 58 sections with approximately 1000 - 1500 students. The efforts to keep the classes small have succeeded; the efforts to modernize the works and keep attuned to the ever changing academic world has also been accomplished. More and more students enroll each quarter and the Division now offers courses at the four Ohio State Branches in Lima, Marion, Mansfield and Newark. Small classes and excellent teachers with a wide variety of backgrounds, and the support of the college of Humanities have helped to make Comparative Literature one of the most useful and popular courses on the campus of The Ohio State University.